

# CALTECH, WATER COMPANY NEGOTIATIONS HIT A WALL

Altadena water company wants university and space lab to pay for water well cleanup:  
Pasadena tests bottled water

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**Y**ears of negotiations between a local water company and Jet Propulsion Laboratory, initiated after the discovery of potentially harmful contaminants in area water supplies, have hit a wall, with local water officials saying the attempts made by JPL to clean up polluted water supplies are unacceptable.

News of negotiations breaking down comes as one Pasadena City Councilman is publicly questioning the quality of the city's drinking water.

In addition, city officials are preparing to market bottled water that is not from Pasadena at all but is really imported from San Diego and bottled in Santa Ana.

Although officials with the Lincoln Avenue Mutual Water Co. say their patience is wearing thin, spokespeople for JPL and Caltech, which manages the space lab for NASA, say negotiations with the local water company are moving forward.

"We are preparing a proposal that should be presented to them within the next 30 days," said Peter Robles, environmental manager of the JPL cleanup project.

"We definitely want an agreement with Lincoln Avenue," Robles said. "A couple of times we have been close to an agreement with them and Lincoln

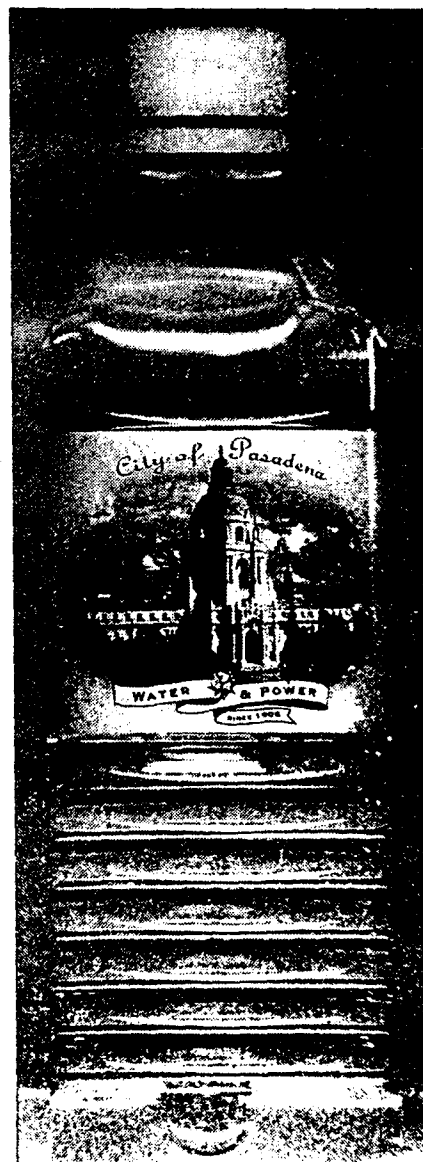
JPL has been an EPA Superfund site since 1992. So far, more than \$17 million has been spent by NASA in cleaning up the toxic mess, with none of that going to help the local water company deal with the contamination in their wells.

"Lincoln Avenue customers have paid the price for JPL's irresponsibility," said Robert Gomperz, vice president of the Lincoln Avenue water company's board of directors. "Our customers have invested over \$2 million in just the 1990s, which includes water treatment as well as purchase of replacement water."

These same water officials say negotiations have been purposely slowed by JPL.

"It seems to me that they're dragging their feet because they don't want to settle before they know what's going to happen with the wrongful death suit against them," said Hayward.

Hayward was referring to a lawsuit filed against JPL and Caltech last year alleging past chemical disposal practices caused cancer to local residents. JPL adamantly denies the claims. The list of plaintiffs in the suit has risen to more



than 50.

Within a two-mile radius of JPL there are four city wells and 11 others that supply water to Pasadena residents and surrounding communities. Two of those wells belong to the Lincoln Avenue water company which provides water to Northwest Altadena.

High levels of volatile organic compounds have been found in Lincoln Avenue wells for more than a decade, and they have had to treat this water before serving it to their customers.

City water supplies have also been tainted with some of these same contaminants. But those wells are being treated by a carbon filtration system that is being paid for by Caltech.

To maintain safety, Lincoln Avenue purchased expensive replacement water from Metropolitan Water District prior to having its own treatment facility installed.

After Lincoln Avenue threatened to sue the institution for reparations, Caltech in 1994 paid the company \$50,000 as part of a "standstill agreement," which called for a willingness to negotiate and a promise not to sue.

"We had pledged an oath of confidentiality in the beginning of negotiations," said Bob Hayward, manager at the Lincoln Avenue water company, "but this thing has dragged on for too long. They have just ignored Northwest Altadena," an area that is already economically impoverished and especially vulnerable to all types of government action, he said.

In the most recent talks between Lincoln Avenue and the space lab, Hayward explained that JPL had made an offer and Lincoln Avenue had come back with a \$2.7 million counteroffer, an amount the water company felt was

acceptable. Now, officials at Lincoln Avenue are waiting to hear what NASA's offer will be.

Said Hayward: "We are still in negotiations with JPL. They told us they have a counteroffer from NASA and that they are reviewing it." But, he said, "This was three months ago."

Gomperz took it a step further. He said Caltech, JPL and NASA have intentionally ignored the needs of Northwest Altadena. "I lump them all together because they function as a bureaucracy, and they have ignored the needs of the community by shirking their responsibility," he said.

"We have been pleading with JPL for years to help us because we have basically been doing their job," Gomperz said. "I would like NASA and Caltech to come to grips with who the responsible parties are going to be in paying for the

cleanup. I'm not critical for JPL having contributed to the problem because when this dumping occurred people weren't as aware as we are today. But now it's time to do the responsible thing and clean it up."

The frustration of Lincoln Avenue officials has been joined by others in the community who are having trouble getting answers to questions about local water quality. At a recent Pasadena City Council meeting, Councilman Bill Crowfoot sharply questioned the quality of the city's drinking water supply.

Rufus Hightower, general manager of Pasadena's Water and Power Department, responded to Crowfoot's criticisms by exclaiming, "Our water is safe. Pasadena's water is very safe." In fact, Pasadena's water is so clean city officials have decided to bottle it and put it on the market in limited quantities.

Although Hightower never mentioned it in his defense of the city's water, Pasadena has ordered nearly 11,000 bottles emblazoned with the image of City Hall on the label.

Hightower and other city officials also did not mention that the water being bottled doesn't even come from Pasadena but from Palomar in San Diego County, according to Shan Kwan, executive director and chief engineer for water services.

When the city finally starts using its own water — no one at the city is quite sure when that will be — "it will come from the upper Arroyo," said Kwan, an area that is "quite a ways" from the Arroyo well which has been closed for more than a year due to the high levels of perchlorate, a chemical used in the production of solid rocket fuel.

The water they hope to use is bubbling up from what is being called a "natural spring," which Kwan explained is "a source of water that naturally comes out of the ground," and one he maintains is free of contaminants.

"We've tested it and there's no contamination there," Kwan said. The level of volatile organic compounds tested well below the maximum contaminant level, and although they have not yet tested this spring water for perchlorate, he was confident of its cleanliness because of the source's distance from the plume of contamination.

Even after Hightower assured the council, "We are putting all our resources into cleaning the water," Crowfoot still was not satisfied.

Calling for more accountability, Crowfoot requested a more detailed report from city staff that would provide information on exactly what's being done to clean up Pasadena's contaminated water.

"I don't know that anyone is dragging their feet," Crowfoot said. "I was just asking the question. There's generally the feeling that government officials are being honest and doing what needs to be done. This is a complicated issue and most people are assuming it's being taken care of."

"I want the staff to tell me what's happening up there. Could the project use some help from the city? Basically, what is the plan? What's the funding? What's the plan calendar? And what can be done by the city to aid this plan?"

Crowfoot is concerned with the amount of time it is taking to remove contaminants from local water supplies.

"Are we moving as fast as we can on the cleanup?" he asked.

Tim Brick, Pasadena's representative to the Metropolitan Water District, said, "I think Bill Crowfoot is asking the right questions. The public does need to know what JPL's cleanup plan is."

Gomperz said that he does not agree with Crowfoot about the quality or the taste of the water being served to Pasadena because he knows that the various water agencies are doing what needs to be done to protect the public. But, he said, "I do agree that something needs to be done about the contamination of our source water." ♦

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